

Practicing mindfulness improves attention and the ability to bounce back from stressful situations.

Mindfulness Cuts Stress, Boosts Productivity

BY LYNN ROSSY

The desire to produce better outcomes and increase profits has led to a decrease in the use of thoughtful processes and procedures for making skillful decisions. Right now I bet you have a computer, smartphone, and iPad within arm's reach. Most people do. And, the misperception that you must multitask to work efficiently results in less productivity instead of more.



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Since the economic downturn of 2009, employees continue to be asked to do more with less, and the fear of losing one's job has led to people working harder and longer, not smarter. The result is a workforce operating with a creativity deficit and an increase in physical, psychological, and cognitive burnout and breakdown.

Partial attention to many things at once results in mistakes, inefficiencies, and breakdowns in communication. Although you might feel like you're working at a breakneck speed, research reveals that we may be taking longer to do our work and doing it less well. Information overload has led to processing failures because of our mind's inability to manage it all.

Mindfulness is the antidote to stress

During the past three decades, researchers have uncovered how the practice of mindfulness can reduce the impact of modern stressors and increase our ability to be productive, creative, happy, and healthy by training our minds to pay attention to the present.

But first, what is mindfulness? A simple definition is: moment-to-moment awareness without judgment. The three characteristics of mindfulness are intention, attention, and attitude.

- You set the *intention* to be present.
- You bring your *attention* to whatever is happening (sounds, sights, thoughts, feelings, tastes, and body sensations) or whatever you're doing (for example, checking your email, writing a proposal, talking to a co-worker, or tying your shoes).
- You have a particular *attitude* that

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you bring to your attention of nonjudging, patience, trust, non-reactivity, acceptance, openness, and a beginner's mind.

Neuroscientists such as Richard Davidson at the Center for Investigating Healthy Minds in Madison, Wisconsin, have shown that mindfulness changes the way the brain functions—which improves cognitive flexibility (the ability to understand multiple points of view), creativity and innovation, well-being, emotional regulation, and empathy. A regular practice of mindfulness also improves attention, which is the ability to block out distractions and the capacity to recover quicker from stressful situations.

Easy mindfulness practices for the workday

You can practice mindfulness in two ways—formally through meditative practices (such as sitting meditation, walking meditation, and mindful yoga) and informally by bringing your full attention to the ordinary activities of your day (such as showering, driving, cooking, eating, talking, or listening).

Here are some simple and effective ways to increase your mindfulness during the workday.

Be aware. Allot five to 15 minutes before work to sit and be aware of the sensations of your breath and your body. When your mind wanders to something else, bring your attention back.

Repeat as many times as necessary. Practiced regularly, this will build your mental muscles so you have improved attention during the workday.

Stress and the Fight-or-Flight Response

Whether it's a looming deadline, a disagreement with a boss, or a project that you're having trouble completing, the response in the body and mind is to fight or flee.

This "fight-or-flight" response is a survival mechanism that came in handy when we needed to fight our enemies or run from lions, tigers, and bears. However, responding to stress in the workplace by fighting or fleeing obviously is not a socially acceptable or effective strategy. Other common yet ineffective strategies include busyness, overworking, overeating, smoking, consuming excessive caffeine or alcohol, and yelling at co-workers.

The signs that you've been hijacked by the fight-or-flight response are a racing heart, muscle tension, hyperventilation, upset stomach, sighing, agitation, anxiety, sweating, and change in appetite. Over time this results in difficulty concentrating, making decisions, and remembering; lack of energy and motivation; frequent illness; and sleep disturbance.

Sound familiar? Stress, if left unchecked and unmanaged, can develop into a host of even more serious psychological and physical diseases.



■ WHEN THE MIND
WANDERS AWAY FROM
WHAT YOU'RE DOING,
BRING IT BACK.

Take five. Whenever you feel stressed, use the "STOP sign technique." Stop. Take five conscious breaths. Observe the sensations of the body and notice what you're thinking and feeling. Proceed. This can be used liberally throughout the day for best results.

Do one thing. Whenever possible, do one thing at a time. When the mind wanders away from what you're doing, bring it back. Repeat as many times as necessary. The brain cannot do more than one thing at a time.

Time-outs. Take a short break (one to five minutes) every 90 to 120 minutes or whenever you feel stuck on a problem. Mindfully stretch, breathe, or walk. You'll come back refreshed and ready to tackle your work again.

Eat somewhere else. Mindfully eat lunch away from your computer. Take a couple of breaths before you eat and notice your hunger level (are you hungry?).

Be aware of the type of food you're about to put into your body (is it food or a food-like substance?). Taste the food and be aware of when you're satisfied. Stop eating. (Seriously, this is essential for how you'll feel the rest of the day.)

Listen. At meetings, practice mindful listening by being fully present for whoever is talking, attempting to understand her perspective, and acknowledging it in some way. This is very difficult to do if you are checking your email or texting.

Note accomplishments. At the end of the day, make a mindful note of what

you accomplished today and then leave work behind as you go spend time with your family and friends.

Benefits of practicing mindfulness at work

Laurie learned mindfulness through a class at work and reports the following: "When I'm getting stressed or about to lose my temper, I take three minutes just to breathe. My body calms down and I'm able to focus again. My anger subsides and I'm able to tackle the problem without blowing up at someone."

Jeff says that he realized after practicing mindfulness how much he lived on "auto-pilot." "Now," Jeff notes, "I put myself in the driver's seat when I go to work and try to stay present for all the things I have to do. My work gets done quicker and better because I'm less distracted."

Take these benefits of mindfulness to work and you will perform better during your workday and still have energy left for the rest of your day.

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Applied Mindfulness

Mindfulness was originally derived from ancient Eastern traditions, but has been incorporated into Western culture in environments as diverse as medical settings, law practices, education (kindergarten through graduate school), prisons, and athletic fields.

Apple, Google, Procter & Gamble, Aetna, and General Mills are just a few of the large corporations that have reaped the benefits of mindfulness programs for their employees. Research at General Mills indicates that 83 percent of participants say they were "taking time each day to optimize my personal productivity," 80 percent report the ability to make better decisions, and 89 percent became better listeners.